

A Royal Affair

Book 1

Book 1 in the series: A Royal Affair

by Marilyn Cruise

For all my readers

CHAPTER 1

My entire body is shivering and my teeth are clattering like crazy. This. Majorly. Sucks. What the hell was I thinking signing up to be an escort?

Ok, focus, Jennifer!

Why did I have to forget my jacket at home? Not only am I making very bad choices in my life, I'm forgetful as hell, which isn't helping me at the moment.

A ruthlessly frigid gust of wind hits me. I'm beginning to believe I'm going to die of hypothermia out here.

Unless I die of shame first. I'd say the odds are roughly 50/50.

"Why, hello there, Mr, Cunningham," I mutter, my voice shuddering. "Oh, my! You are such a sexy thing, aren't you? I'm Jennifer, and this lovely evening, it's my pleasure to be your date."

Ugh!

This is beyond ludicrous.

But If I want to keep my job, I better follow orders or else... And those are the precise words I was told to recite by Gary, my new Escorts and Lovers boss, when I meet my very first client. Now if I could just say them with enough conviction so Ben will actually believe I mean it, that would be great.

Why didn't they include a section in the three-hour escort orientation, teaching me to lie like a pro and go against my feelings?

I run my hands up and down my goosebump-speckled arms, trying to rub

any amount of heat into them, because any amount of heat is more than the zero heat I feel in my body at the moment.

I've been waiting outside the Royal Porter Hotel in downtown Orlando beneath the overhang for the past thirty minutes. Mr. Cunningham was supposed to be here twenty minutes ago, at 7:00 p.m., so we could go to dinner. I should have known. Men who have money and status think the rules of common courtesy don't apply to them.

Wearing nothing but a black, sequin, spaghetti-strap, scandalously high above-the-knee length cocktail dress and three-inch black pumps, I have no defense against the icy gust of air that blasts against me.

I scan my surroundings again, but no one looks in the least bit like my first client. Ben's profile says he's 5'8. In his picture, he has short, dirty blond hair and ogley hazel eyes. And he looked like a fitness freak, which worries me a bit since I haven't seen the inside of a gym, like, ever.

However, of all the other women, he chose me, even though I made it very clear on my *Escorts & Lovers* profile that I'm not into fitness in the least, and have a few curves. Maybe it was my waist-long, wavy, dark hair that made him interested. He said he liked it.

Another particularly ruthless gust of wind blasts against me.

Oh. My. God! It's so damn freaking cold!

Forget waiting outside!

I team into the high-end hotel for the fourth time to warm up. Right as I step through the glass swiveling doors, heat encompasses me. My body immediately starts to thaw. I head straight for the fireplace and turn my ass toward it.

"Jennifer! Wow your lips are blue!" Claire Kenyon, my best friend of eleven

years, and my co-worker of one, stands up from the leather sectional, her big blue eyes brimming with concern. She walks over to me and wraps her arms around to my back, rubbing vigorously.

“I’ll be ok,” I say.

Claire is here to make sure my very first *Escorts and Lovers* client isn’t some serial killer or kidnapper.

Or both.

“You’re quivering like a leaf, you poor thing,” she says. Claire is striking in every way—tall, slender, blonde, has skin of marble, and is super smart, funny, and sexy. And with a generous monthly allowance from her father, she always looks like she just walked off the cover of a fashion magazine. Me, I haven’t been able to afford a new outfit for a couple of years. In fact, the dress I’m wearing is Claire’s.

“He’s still not here yet?” she asks as she pulls away, her irises reflecting the flames in the fireplace.

I shake my head. “No phone call either.” I trust Claire without reservation. Like peas in a pod, we suffered through middle-school humiliation together and through high school hell, and lately, our friendship has been the glue that has kept my wreck-of-a life from falling apart.

“Well, he certainly doesn’t deserve sex,” she says.

“Don’t worry. I’m not a *Lover*. I’m an *Escort*.”

Her right eyebrow rises. “Which means what again...?”

“My job is to provide good conversation, female company, and perhaps a make-out session or two.”

“So basically, you’re there to look good on a man’s arm and be his PG-13 date,” she says.

I nod, but cringe inwardly. For the eleventh time since I got here, I remind myself why I'm putting myself through this humiliation. When my parents died in a car accident a year ago, my seventeen-year-old younger sister, Gabby, was in the same accident. She survived, but lost both legs. My parents had no savings and no insurance, so we were out of luck. Now I'm trying to save up for her \$19,000-ish prosthetic legs so she can have somewhat of a normal life.

"What's the cancellation policy?" Claire asks.

"He'll show." I hope I'm right, but there's a little voice inside me that fears I'm wrong.

I need this money.

Desperately.

Right now I have \$236 in my bank, and I haven't even paid rent this month yet. I really, really, really need this job. If Ben doesn't show, I don't get paid. Which is a ridiculous rule since I took the time to get all dolled up and pretty.

I glance up when a beefy, handsome, middle-aged man, wearing a black suit passes us by. Then, I see another one just like him down the hallway, only more muscular. Suddenly, the entire foyer is crawling with brute men dressed in black suits, wires going from their ears and vanishing into the collars of their white dress shirts.

"What's up with all the security guards?" The sight of so many of them makes my breathing shallow.

Claire shrugs, then smiles mischievously. "I have no idea, but if I didn't already have plans, I'd sure have liked to take one of them home. Two even." She's a self-proclaimed serial dater and has hooked up with more men than there are minutes in the hour.

I chuckle. "I'm sure you would. But from the looks of it, I think they're on an

important job.”

“God I love a serious man who isn’t available,” she mutters, then bites her perfectly pouty bottom lip. “It makes the chase that much more fun.”

“I triple-dog dare you to try,” I nudge.

She exhales, her shoulders slumping. “I’m meeting Jeremy later, remember?”

Jeremy is her long-time friend-with-benefits friend. He’s a sweetheart, and I’ve often wondered why they don’t just make their relationship official. He loves her—that much is obvious—and she seems to adore him. And she can’t brag enough about their amazing sex life.

“So how long are you going to give this no-show loser before you decide to come out dancing with Jeremy and me?” Claire asks, eyeing one of the hot, buff dudes.

Now that my rear end feels like it’s burning, I turn around and warm my front side in the flames of the fireplace. “I’ll wait until he shows.”

“You’re way too nice,” she says. “I’d have been outta here five minutes past.”

But she’s not desperate for money like I am. “I’m sure he’ll show up in a moment. Maybe he forgot his jacket at home.” And truth be told, I’d prefer to go on a date rather than be the third wheel to Claire and Jeremy’s date.

Again.

Claire shakes her head and rolls her eyes. “Already making excuses for him?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m pathetic.”

“How long has it been since you were laid?” she asks. “Over two years, right?”

She’s such a great friend, always reminding me of things like that. “I’m an

'Escort', not a 'Lover'."

"I'm a great people reader," she says. "I'll be able to let you know if he'll be good in bed. And if the opportunity presents itself, why not have a little fun?"

She's right about the people-reading part. She's not been wrong once about anyone since I met her.

She slumps down onto the couch again, spreads her arms across the back of the couch and crosses her legs. "You've had a rough year." Her voice has turned soft, as if she knows she's treading on sensitive ground. "Maybe it's time you open yourself up to love again."

Her comment makes my insides roil, and I shift on my feet.

"And if you have chemistry with this...what was his name again?" She squints.

"Ben," I say.

"Yes, Ben. If there's chemistry, why don't you just use him for some pleasure?"

God, I can't believe I'm even considering this. But having a man touch me, caress me, kiss me...to receive some affection...it's been way to long since that happened. "What if he's a psychopath?"

"Since I'm a people expert, I'll nudge your elbow if I like him, tap my nose if I think he's a creep, and step on your foot if he's a jerk. Just don't forget to bring him in here so I can meet him," she says.

"I don't know. Maybe," I say.

"Deal."

"Uh... I said *maybe*."

"Maybe is 'yes' in my book." She smiles triumphantly.

Feeling sufficiently warm to take on the cold at least one more time, I

glance back outside.

Huh.

There's a man out there that wasn't before. Maybe that's Ben. It's hard to make out his physical features from here so I head toward the swiveling doors. I step outside and I suck in a sudden breath as the frigid air hits me. Ugh! I forgot how cold it is out here.

I glance at the man standing directly to the right. From what I can tell from my limited side view, he's young, and very, oh, very attractive.

He's smoking a cigarette, which with any other guy would be a complete turn-off and an immediate, interminable deal-breaker, but not with him. I bet he could make anything look cool *and* healthy.

He's leaning his back against the hotel marble wall. He wears a black tuxedo with silver cufflinks. Rich as hell, probably. Probably arrogant too. I mean, I know I shouldn't judge but I can't help myself. I've had too many encounters with the likes of him.

The black bowtie at his neck is undone, as are the top buttons of his shirt. His face is partly hidden from me in the shadow, but the contours of his muscular physique are glaringly obvious, as is his height—he must be at least six-foot two. My motto is and always has been: *tallness is next to godliness*. And this man is indeed godly on so many levels.

He turns to face me and I can't help but take in a sudden breath because I immediately feel utterly defenseless when his intense green eyes watch me. He's definitely *not* my date, Ben.

But, oh, my! I wish he was.

My cheeks warm, and I almost get the feeling that I've seen him or met him somewhere before. Is he perhaps on the *Escorts and Lovers* site? No. I'd

certainly remember him if he were.

He's hotter than hell. All of a sudden I realize that I have become completely and utterly oblivious to the cold. I can't help but feel a magnetic pull toward him. My stomach flutters.

What... the? I can't remember the last time that happened.

"Hi," he says with a crooked smile as he moves out from the shadow. He exhales the cigarette smoke away from me. Holy... Marlon Brando has nothing on this guy—except he looks shockingly like the movie star, full lips, a mole above his mouth on the left side and all. He has a straight nose, thick lashes, dirty blond, medium, short, wavy hair that flies about his face in the frigid wind. His chiseled face and sheer beauty and charisma would make a movie director weep with joy.

"Hello," I croak. Without my permission, my heart starts to beat in a pounding, disjointed rhythm. I feel eerily uncomfortable and unreasonably excited at the same time.

I hate it. I love it.

"I'm sorry." He drops the cigarette to the cobblestone ground and steps on it with his shiny black Oxford. He sits down on the bench, elbows resting on his firm thighs, as he hunches forward.

I squint, acutely aware that I have lost the ability to think. Or breathe. And... why is my heart racing like crazy? It's not like he's my type or anything. Despite my reasonable self screaming at me to ignore the man—'cause I know men like him are trouble—I say, "Sorry for what?"

"I don't really smoke," he says with a deep chuckle that hits me right in the solar plexus. "Last time I lit up was two and a half years ago." I note a slight accent, but I can't quite place it. French? No. German? Definitely not.

“So why are you smoking now?” I take a small, hesitant step forward. Ugh, I don’t really want to engage with a guy like him, do I? Yet, something invisible, but irresistibly forceful draws me toward him and there’s absolutely no way I can stop myself.

The right side of his lips quirk up, and something about the way he glances up at me sends a shiver of excitement through my body.

“I have to attend a charity ball that starts in twenty minutes. And my girlfriend just broke up with me.”

“Oh. She’s not coming, then?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“I’m sorry.”

“Not your doing.” His eyebrows rise and he sits back, one arm extending across the back of the bench, the other running through his hair before settling on his thigh. He watches me intently for a moment, and for some inexplicable reason, my cheeks turn hot. “Were you headed to the ball as well?” He gives me a soft smile and his dimples appear.

“No...er... Just dinner.”

“With your boyfriend?” he asks.

Make up a story, quick! There’s no way I’m telling him I just started a job as an escort. It’s too embarrassing for me to admit it to him. Ha, I can barely even admit it to myself! “I just had...have...er. I’m waiting for my date and he’s late. It’s a first date. Kind of a blind date—date.” I huff. Sheesh. I can hardly manage to formulate a single sentence. Is it him or is it the fact that I’m starting an embarrassing job? “He was supposed to be here at seven.”

“So you’re dateless at this point,” he says.

“Well. I’m not... yet,” I say.

“Right.” He stares at me for a few seconds, and it’s as if time has suspended. He smiles, revealing perfect, white teeth. And that dimple again...

I should look away. Be normal, Jennifer!

Before I can decide on whether I should smile back or not, he breaks eye contact and taps the empty space next to him on the bench. “Why don’t you have a seat?” He says it in a way that makes me think he’s used to getting what he wants. It’s not a suggestion, rather a command.

Yup. Rich man. Power. Control. Gets what he wants kind of guy.

Not my type. My types are nerds, tree-huggers, and humanists. Not hot, well-dressed, worldly, wealthy, money-mongering, cocky men who think they are God’s gift to women and who can afford to dress in smokin’ hot tuxedos and donate millions to charity events. He’s absolutely not my type.

My insides clench, vehemently disagreeing.

What the...?

Against my better judgment, I slink over to him, and just as I sit down beside him, a blast of wind gusts against my bare legs. Shuddering so, I wrap my arms around my torso, but it does little to shield me from the cold.

“Here.” The young man takes off his jacket.

“That’s really not necessary,” I object.

“You’re shivering like a leaf.” He places the jacket around my shoulders.

I go to object again, but oh... mmm...his jacket is so very warm and silky on the inside. “Won’t you be cold?” And his scent, it’s as if it has mind-altering powers over me, causing me to lose all reasonableness.

“Where I’m from, this almost feels like summer.” He chuckles.

I smile and my gaze slides to his. “Where are you from?”

“Norway.” He watches me carefully as he says it, and I blush again.

Oh, my God. I need to get a grip.

“That explains it,” I say.

His spontaneous laugh does delicious things to my insides. “Are you visiting then?” I ask.

“I’m attending the University of Florida,” he says.

“I took a semester there.” That was before my parents died and I had hopes of earning a law degree.

“Did you like the university?” he asks.

“Yes. I just... I’m working now. At *Coffee and Go*. Being an adult, you know. Paying the bills.” I’m so spellbound by this god-like man that I’ve completely forgotten why I’m here. He peruses me with amusement, and I feel like I need to fill the silence with something.

“Being a responsible adult is highly overrated,” I say. “Just in case you were wondering.”

“A necessary evil.” He chuckles, as if he has plenty of experience in that department.

“Yes, but no fun,” I say.

“Indeed.” He glances at his platinum watch. Silence settles between us. “What else do you like to do?” he asks.

“Oh, I’m a dog walker, and I sew, I dance, and paint, and write poetry. You know. Lots of stuff.”

“I like creative people,” he says.

“Really?”

He nods. “You intrigue me. If your date doesn’t show up in the next three minutes, care to join me for a glass of wine at the bar?”

I can’t afford to lose this client. I should stay right here. And I will. My will

is stronger than my lust. "I don't think so. But thanks."

"Well, do you have anything better to do tonight?" he asks with a crooked smile.

I want to say that I do have lots of other things to do, but he knows I have been stood up.

"Then why waste a perfectly good evening and a damn sexy dress and just go home and watch TV the rest of the evening when you can end it in any number of interesting ways?" he asks.

Assuming he's offering sex, I shoot him a glare. "I'm not a slut," I snap.

He doesn't even flinch. "Good, because I make it a point to never pay for sex."

I gasp. Damn rich boy. Does he think I'll drop my panties and fall all over myself just because he's got money? Well, this girl is not going to be this man's ego booster. "What I mean is, if I accept, I'm not going to sleep with you." Why did what I just said sound like a question?

And why the hell am I still sitting here? I should leave because clearly, he's just after one thing. A rebound.

Ugh. I don't want to go. But I will. Because...

Dammit! Stand up, Jennifer!

"Good evening, sir," I snap.

I storm back inside, quickly finding Claire, who is still sitting in the same spot she was before.

Her face lights up into a smile. "Oh, you found him?"

"No." I huff.

She squints. "Whose tuxedo jacket?"

Crap!

Now I need to go return it to him. "Hold on." I spin around to head toward the exit, but instead of moving forward, I bump into the Norwegian's muscular chest. Standing right in front of him, it's now I realize how tall he is. Yep. He's six-foot three—at least. I'm 5'6, but even with the 3-inch heels I'm wearing, the top of my head only reaches to the bottom of his sexy, cleft chin. He peers down at me, eyes hooded, and he licks his bottom lip.

Without my consent, my heart goes all crazy wild.

"Hello again," he says with a smirk. "Are you sure you won't join me?"

I take a generous step backward, pull the jacket off, and hand it to him. He puts the jacket on and I catch another whiff of his cologne. It smells so very good.

"I just don't appreciate how you assumed I'd have sex with you," I say.

There's movement at the corner of my eye. Strange. I get the feeling the security guards are stalking our every move, listening to our verbal exchanges.

"I didn't assume anything. You assumed that I assumed that." His eyes smolder.

"Hi, I'm Claire." She smiles at him with a sparkle in her eye and nudges my elbow with hers, a sure sign she approves. "It's a true pleasure to meet you. Just wow!"

"I'm trying to get your friend to get a drink with me, but she seems resistant," he says without taking his eyes off me.

"Jennifer, remember what we talked about earlier?" Claire says with a stiff smile as she clutches my elbow. Hard.

She must be referring to how we discussed that I never have sex. Or that she's an excellent people reader.

"Since the other guy stood you up, you should totally get a drink with...?"

Claire lets her voice trail off and turns toward him. "What should I call you?"

He holds out a hand and they shake. "Erik, please."

"Perfect," she says with a giggle, falling all over herself because of the guy. "Remember, Jennifer. Nothing is more boring than being the third wheel on my date with Jeremy."

"See? I'm girlfriend approved," the sexy foreigner chimes in and smiles.

Why are they ganging up on me? I do not like it. No, not one bit. But Claire's approval of him makes me think I should reconsider his offer. But why? Is she just in love with his looks like I am? Could that be it?

"I need to use the ladies room," Claire says. "Will you excuse us for one moment?" She pulls me with her before I can protest and stops abruptly just as we clear the corner, then turns to face me. Her gaze is determined. "You *have* to say yes. Why are you even hesitating?"

I stare at her, completely confounded for a moment. I'm floored. Really. Can't she see through the guy's high and mighty rich-dude I-just-want-to-get-between-your-legs crap? "Let me enlighten you. He told me he—well, it was more like he alluded to—that he expects me to sleep with him after."

She stares at me, a baffled look on her face, horrified almost. "Aaaand?"

"Seriously?"

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, Jennifer," she says.

"Once in a lifetime? What in the world are you talking about?" I ask.

"I mean, for months you've been complaining that you're not dating, and then Prince Charming shows up and—"

"Well yeah, but—"

"But what?" she asks.

"I—"

“You need to have some fun, and you know you do.” She folds her arms in front of her chest and glares at me, her left eyebrow rising way up.

“But Ben...” I object, feeling a sting of guilt as I consider dumping Ben and losing precious income that would go to my sister’s prosthetic legs.

“He’s not showing. It’s seven thirty in case you failed to notice.” Her arms are flailing now.

“Oh, my God. What’s wrong with you?” I ask.

“What’s wrong with *you*?” She’s nearly shouting now, and a few heads turn. “If you don’t go out with him, I’ll never ever let it go.”

Now she’s just being crazy. But I have to admit I’ve never seen her this adamant about anything, so maybe I should just go with it. “Fine! But if it turns into a disaster, I’m calling you pick me up.”

Her eyes come alight and she squeals in delight. “Of course. You can always count on me for anything. And I promise you won’t regret it.”

Still slightly agitated, my reluctance holding on, I fish my phone out of my purse to let Gary know that my client, Ben, is a no-show.

“Call me after, ok?” Claire gives me a quick hug.

I watch as she walks toward the exit and makes her way outside. What did I just agree to? Can I really do this? What if my client shows up? I look at my phone. Should I call Gary? Yes, I should. I dial his number. Five rings, no answer. I call again. Still no answer. I type up a message.

*Gary, my client, Ben Cunningham didn't show up. It's 7:34. I'm leaving.
Jennifer.*

I press send. Peeking around the corner at my new date, I catch another

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